

The Pool of Flame



By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—The story opens at Monte Carlo with Colonel Terence O'Rourke in his hotel. O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, is dressing for appearance in the restaurant below when the sound of a girlish voice singing attracts his attention. Learning out on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly disappears. He rushes to the corridor to see a neatly gowned form enter the elevator and pass from sight.

CHAPTER II.—O'Rourke's mind is filled with thoughts of the girl, and when he goes to the gaming table he allows his remarkable winnings to accumulate indifferently. He notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Bertie Glynn, while his companion is Viscount Des Trebes, a noted duelist. When O'Rourke leaves the table the viscount tells him he represents the French government and that he has been directed to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission.

CHAPTER III.—At his room O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, awaits the viscount. O'Rourke finds a mysterious letter in his apartment. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until he reaches the ocean. He says the French government will pay O'Rourke 25,000 francs for his services. A pair of dainty slippers are seen protruding from under a doorway curtain and the viscount charges O'Rourke with having a spy secreted there.

CHAPTER IV.—When the Irishman goes to his room he finds there the owner of the mysterious package. It is his wife, Beatrice, from whom he had run away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he had received, he finds that a law firm in Rangoon, India, offers him 100,000 pounds for an Indian jewel known as the Pool of Flame and left to him by a dying friend. O'Rourke tells his wife that it is in the keeping of a friend named Chambret in Algeria.

CHAPTER V.—O'Rourke is forced to fight a duel with the viscount. The arrogant nobleman is worsted in the combat and acts the poltroon.

CHAPTER VI.—The loyal wife bids O'Rourke farewell and he promises to soon return with the reward offered for the Pool of Flame. He discovers both Glynn and the viscount on board the ship which takes him to Algeria.

CHAPTER VII.—Chambret has left Algeria and O'Rourke has to gain a military detachment going across the desert to reach his friend. As he finds the latter there is an attack by bandits and Chambret is shot.

CHAPTER VIII.—Chambret dies telling O'Rourke that he has left the Pool of Flame with the governor general of Algeria. He gives the colonel a signet ring at the sight of which he says the official will deliver over the jewel.

CHAPTER IX.—O'Rourke is attacked by Glynn and the viscount who ransack his luggage, but he worships them in the conflict.

CHAPTER X.—When he arrives at Algeria the Irishman finds the governor general away. He receives a note from Des Trebes making a mysterious appointment.

CHAPTER XI.—The viscount tells O'Rourke that he has gained possession of the jewel by stealing it from the safe of the governor general. He does not, however, know who has offered the reward for it. He suggests a duel with rapiers, the victor to get that information and the jewel.

CHAPTER XII.—The efforts of O'Rourke are now directed toward speedily getting to Rangoon with the jewel and he starts by ship.

CHAPTER XIII.—He finds the captain of the vessel to be a smuggler who tries to steal the jewel from him.

CHAPTER XIV.—The jewel is finally secured by the ship's captain and O'Rourke escapes to land.

CHAPTER XV.—With the aid of one Danny and his sweetheart, O'Rourke recovers the Pool of Flame.

CHAPTER XVI.—O'Rourke again forms his plans to pursue his journey to Rangoon.

CHAPTER XVII.—On board ship once more a mysterious lady appears who puzzles and interests the Irishman.

CHAPTER XVIII.—O'Rourke comes upon a lascar about to attack the lady, who is a Mrs. Pryne. He kicks the man into the hold.

CHAPTER XIX.—Mrs. Pryne claims she is en route for India on a mission for the king.

CHAPTER XX.—The ship captain is offered money to increase the speed of the vessel toward its destination.

CHAPTER XXI.—There are suspicious occurrences on board, and a lascar seems to be watching O'Rourke and Mrs. Pryne.

CHAPTER XXII.—The woman tells of some one prowling about the cabin and trying the door of her stateroom.

O'Rourke divined she had something on her mind which she hesitated to voice, though they were practically alone; the man at the wheel was a nonentity—bronze statue in a faded shirt, ragged turban and soiled cummerbund.

"Then 'tis yourself will be glad, I gather, to be rid of us, madam?" He had not made up his mind when his thoughts were given a new turn by a new complication, in the shape of Mrs. Pryne herself. That lady came up the companion steps with no apparent hesitation, no fear or apprehension; quietly and confidently alert, on the other hand, she was visibly armed and prepared against danger in whatever form she might have to encounter it.

She came directly to the adventurer, without so much as a glance for the group of lascars or the grim evidences of tragedy upon the deck. O'Rourke shut his teeth with exasperation. Whatever he decided to believe of the serang, whether his judgment said of the man, "Guilty," or "Not Guilty," he dared risk nothing with the woman present. He could not tell what hell of murder and mutiny he might not let loose upon the Rance, did he make one ill-advised or hasty move. Alone, he could have faced the situation with

side, he felt as though handcuffed.

"You are hurt, Colonel O'Rourke?" "A mere scratch, madam—an inch of skin shaved off me arm. Be good enough to return to the saloon, waken Danny and send him to me."

She ignored the curtness of his tone, even as she ignored his wish. "What has happened?" she demanded, ranging herself by his side. "Who is that—there on the deck?" Her voice rising a note, foreboded hysteria.

"Quick—stabbed. I didn't want ye to see. A lascar ran amok, cut down the captain, was killed himself—kindness," the irrepressible humorist broke out, "of our little brown brother, the serang."

His eyes never left the latter; not an instant did he take his attention from the cluster of dark figures; he was more than every ready to defend himself should they make any overt move, deeming his attention distracted.

"What will you do?" "How can I say? Do ye, for the love of God, get below and leave me to deal with these fiends in me own fashion."

"Which," she returned equably, "is precisely what I shall not do." "If that's the case," he said brusquely, "have the kindness to hand me the revolver by the captain's side, and—ye might see if the poor fellow still lives."

He heard a quick rustle of skirts and the woman's hand closed over his, pressing into his palm the weapon he had desired. As promptly, without further words, she turned to Quick.

The adventurer deliberated briefly, while she bent over the captain, making a hurried examination. "He is badly wounded," O'Rourke heard her say, as he arrived at his decision, "but not dead."

"Praise God for that! . . . I must ask ye, madam, to back me up. It is necessary to clear the decks. Are ye ready?" He saw, out of the tail of his eye, that she had sprung to her feet. "Now, ye curs," he thundered, with a menacing pistol in either hand, "get forward, the lot of ye. Move, ye blackguards!"

They went expeditiously, crowding between the deck-house and the rail, huddling together as if for mutual protection. The serang was the last to move, and went reluctantly, or seemed to.

Yet that was no time to judge him for a minor fault. O'Rourke herded the pack before him, watched them scramble down the ladder to the fore-deck, then backed to the spot where the woman stood above the captain. His arm was paining him somewhat, with the irritating, stinging ache that such wounds produce, and he thrust one revolver into his pocket, clasping a hand above the hurt.

In a flash realization of his loss came to him; he clutched the rail with a cry. The Pool of Flame, his sacred trust, was gone! His eyes searched the deck wildly, but found no trace of the round leather bag with its precious burden. Despair gripped his heart in a clutch of ice, and for a space the ship reeled about him.

He found himself gazing blankly into the woman's solicitous eyes. "What is it? What is it?" he heard her voice repeating breathlessly. He knew that his own lips moved for some seconds without sound as he strove to answer her. The words, when they came, should have been quite unintelligible to her; he realized this almost as soon as he had uttered them: "The Pool of Flame!"

Then he stumbled forward, crying aloud for the serang. Half-way to the ladder he halted; that individual's head and shoulders were lifting above the level of the deck. O'Rourke covered him and called him aft as he again retreated to the scene of the tragedy.

Had he been in a condition to think coherently, he might have acted more prudently. But maddened, he was able to grasp but one fact; that the Pool of Flame was gone and must be recovered at whatever hazard.

The lascar came with what might have seemed suspicious alacrity, considering the fact that he was coerced, that O'Rourke held him at the pistol's point. Gaunt and sombre in the moonlight, moving noiselessly in his bare feet, head up and arms swinging limp, he advanced without a pause until about six feet from the Irishman; at which distance O'Rourke, collecting his wits, found voice enough to bid the fellow, "Stop!"

The serang halted, impassive, unmoved. "The sahib has called," he said in an even voice. "I am come. What is the sahib's will with me?"

His words, together with his half-indolent, half-defiant, wholly contemptuous bearing, supplied the one thing needful to restore to the adventurer his self-control. O'Rourke drew himself up, master of self once more, and looked the lascar in the eye. "You stand," he said slowly, choosing his words, "on the edge of the grave. Do you comprehend that, dog?"

"Aye, sahib!" "I have called ye, then, to demand back that which is mine, the leather bag which ye stole when ye slew my brother, pretending falsely it was he who had slain the captain. I counsel ye, speak truth and render back to me that which ye have stolen."

The serang stiffened, his eyes glistening in the moonlight. "Sahib!" he cried as if in supplication. "No words, dog!" cried O'Rourke sternly. "Do as I bid ye, or abide the result of disobedience!"

"The sahib," said the serang slowly, "is full of eyes and wisdom. He

sees what no man would believe he could see. I am content." He bowed his head with curious submissiveness, stretching forth his palms as if in token of surrender.

O'Rourke caught at his breath. He had scarcely hoped for this; he had merely called the serang aft as the leader of the lascars, hoping to frighten him into revealing whichever of his comrades had stolen the great ruby—if he knew.

"Ye have, then, the leather bag?" he demanded, exultation in his voice. "Aye, sahib; or, if not that, I have that which was therein."

"The stone?" "Aye, sahib."

"Then give it me." "I am the sahib's slave." The serang flashed a strange smile at the revolver in O'Rourke's hand. His attitude puzzled O'Rourke; he would hardly have believed this of the man; rather he could have conceived of him as denying the theft to the last and fighting like an unchained fiend to retain his booty. His present pose was out of character, or the Irishman misjudged him.

Out of character or no, it was comfortable. The serang, with head bent, was fumbling in the folds of his sash; O'Rourke thought him over long about it, yet was inclined to give him time in view of his abject surrender.

At length, still smiling oddly, the man lifted his eyes and stretched forth a hand tight closed. "The sahib," he said gently, "shall see that his servant spoke truth. Let this weigh with the sahib for mercy. Behold!"

The brown fingers unclosed and in the hollow of his palm trembled that which seemed a ball of crystallized rose fire, the stone that man has named the Pool of Flame. O'Rourke uttered a low cry of satisfaction, stepping forward to snatch up the jewel. Simultaneously he was aware of a quick gasp from the direction of the woman, followed, ere he could account for them, by two pistol shots.

The adventurer groaned, pitching forward blindly, one side of his head, from the ear to the temple, a quiver with an agony as if a white-hot iron had seared him there. He stretched forth an arm aimlessly and gripped an iron stanchion, stopping his fall, and hung there for what seemed an eon, sea and skies swimming blood-red before his eyes, in his ears a thunderous rushing as of mighty waters.

By a supreme effort of will he kept himself half-erect, clinging to the rail, and opened his eyes. So briefly had pain blinded him that it was patent barely a second had elapsed since the firing of the shots. To his left a stricken lascar was still in the act of falling; before him Mrs. Pryne stood motionless, her face a mask of horror, revolver still poised; to the right the serang, drawing a kris, was smiling sardonically, his eyes fixed upon the woman who had set at naught his plans.

O'Rourke tried to call a warning to her, for it was plain that she was appalled by what she had done, heedless of all but the man she had killed; but it was as if the bullet that creased his temple had temporarily paralyzed him; his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth and he could neither move nor speak.

Powerless (he believed), he watched the serang gather himself together, like some gaunt cat, and spring; in two strides he would have been upon the woman and the night had been crowned with its most pitiful crime. Yet in midair, O'Rourke saw the man falter and fall back, dropping the kris and clutching frantically at nothing.

Stupidly the adventurer saw the smoke trickling from the muzzle of his own revolver and knew that, somehow, he had managed to pull the trigger. His heart leapt in his breast, so keen was his gratitude. Trembling in every limb, he essayed a second time to fire and put a final period to the serang's career. But his shot went wide and the cylinder jammed so that the hammer would not rise a second time. With an oath he let go the rail and attempted to bridge the distance between himself and the lascar, who was now at a considerable distance reeling away toward the rail.

But his overtaxed strength, sapped by loss of blood, failed him; and malice infused new vigor into the serang, new power to accomplish his final fiendish act.

Grinning with anguish, the man leapt away from O'Rourke, staggered and, jerking back his arm, flung the Pool of Flame from him with all his might.

O'Rourke paused, petrified with despair. The great stone, glinting in the moonlight like the very heart of fire, described a long and flaming arc and . . . the sea leapt up with a hiss to welcome it and it was gone.

A bitter cry broke from the Irishman's lips; he made for the man, whom he would gladly have killed with his bare hands. But again he failed. The lascar, perhaps guessing his intention, was at the last too quick for him.

By a supreme effort the gaunt serang seized the rail, lifted himself upon it, and dropped over the side, following that to win which he had given his life.

CHAPTER XXV.

Mrs. Pryne, roused out of her semistupor by O'Rourke's cry, with some return of her habitual clearness of thought, stepped to the companionway and called for her maid.

O'Rourke passed a hand over his eyes, and brought it away black with blood, but was no more than half

aware of this. Dazed and heart-broken, he stared blankly round the shambles that was the deck, then, recovering slightly, saw Cecilia join her mistress, and realized that, whatever his personal grief, pain and despair, he must play the part of the O'Rourke. So he turned and staggered down into the saloon.

Danny was in his berth, sleeping the childlike and loglike sleep that was ever his. Dravos, below, his ears deafened by the mighty chant of his engines, had been no more conscious of the drama on deck than had Danny. O'Rourke caught the boy with hands that gripped his shoulders cruelly, and shook him awake, then methodically booted him up the steps to the deck.

Once there, Danny came to his proper senses and fell with a will to the tasks O'Rourke set for him. With Cecilia he lifted the unconscious captain and bore him down to his berth, then left him to the ministrations of mistress and maid and returned to throw overboard the last corpse, that of the lascar whom the serang had set to slay the adventurer from behind.

O'Rourke himself proceeded to the bridge, where he found the helmsman still at the wheel, soberly keeping the vessel on her course. The circumstance at the time surprised him; but it afterwards was developed by dint of cross-examination of the remainder of the crew that the serang had specially exempted Quick and Dravos from the general massacre, they being held necessary to the navigation of the ship. He had likewise put strict injunctions on the helmsman not to desert the wheel, whatever the tide of battle, whether for or against his brethren. The stabbing of Quick seemed to have been accidental, or necessary under circumstances unforeseen.

As a matter of fact, the remainder of the lascars were thoroughly cowed and proved unbelievably docile for the balance of the trip.

Thus it was that the voyage of the Rance from Aden to Bombay was pushed through without further fatality. To the Irishman, however, must go more than half the credit; for forty-eight hours he never left the bridge nor once closed his eyes in slumber.

It was not indeed until the Rance, on the stroke of the hour, the evening of the fifteenth day of June, walked smartly into Bombay harbor, the international code signal "N.J." fluttering from her peak, rounded Colabra and dropped anchor off the point; not until Danny and Dravos, free at length from their toil in the broiling engine-room, came on deck to relieve him, that O'Rourke collapsed—stumbled down the bridge ladder and lurched drunkenly down the saloon companionway. His head humming with sleep, his brain bemused with fatigue and pain, his eyes heavy, he brushed by Mrs. Pryne without seeing her or even hearing her low cry of pity and solicitude; and so entering the first stateroom that he came to, threw himself, already asleep, into the berth.

As he did so a loaded revolver dropped from his numb fingers.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was night when O'Rourke awoke; he found himself staring wide-eyed at the ceiling of the stateroom, upon which rippled wavering lines of light reflected through the porthole by the waters without. His mind for the time was a blank; he was merely conscious that he was rested and very thirsty, and that the ship was motionless.

Then in a blinding flash memory returned to him. He rose, curiously light-headed and strangely weak, pushed open the door and stepped into the saloon.

It was lighted, if poorly, by a smoky kerosene lamp dependent from a beam above the center-table, and wore a hollow, dingy air of desolation for all that Danny slept there, his vivid head pillowed on arms crossed before him on the table. The ship was utterly silent, and the O'Rourke's sensitive instinct told him that it was tenanted only by himself and the servant.

He clapped a hand on Danny's shoulder and shook him into wakefulness. The boy leapt to his feet with a cry and, seizing O'Rourke's hand, began to sob upon it—a touching but disconcerting performance, to the last degree exasperating to a man thirsting and famished.

O'Rourke, as gently as he could, disengaged his hand and thrust Danny away, at the same time indicating in no uncertain tones that he preferred meat and drink to emotional crisis. Provided with a duty, Danny's sentimental nature was diverted; he bustled away and returned with an excellent cold meal—sandwiches, a salad, cheese, and other edibles upon a tray graced likewise by a bottle of champagne. And you are to believe that the master fell to and wolfed it all, to the last crumb and the last drop.

A new man, refreshed, he demanded a pipe, and, with his head cocked on one side and something of his old humor twinkling in his eye, what time it was not clouded with bewilderment and concern at the answers he received, cross-examined his valet.

"How long," was his first question, "will I have slept now, Danny ye divvie?"

"Wan complete round av the clock, yer honor."

"Where are we?" "At anchor, sor, off the Fort in Bombay harbor."

"Umm-hm. I'm by way of remembering something of that. What of the captain?"

[Continued in our Next]

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L. & N. TIME-TABLE

IN EFFECT JAN 14, 1911. AT 11:59 P. M.

Trains Arrive

No.	FROM	
34	Atlanta, Ga., Daily	5:21 am
134	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	4:34 am
29	Cynthiana, Ky., Daily	7:35 am
7	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	7:38 am
10	Rowland, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	7:55 am
40	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	8:12 am
37	Cincinnati, O., Daily	8:30 am
12	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	8:50 am
12	Lexington, Ky., Daily	10:15 am
33	Cincinnati, O., Daily	10:24 am
26	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	12:00 am
25	Cynthiana, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	3:10 pm
9	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	3:15 pm
138	Lexington, Ky., Daily	3:34 pm
38	Knoxville, Tenn., Daily	3:35 pm
5	Maysville, Ky., Daily	5:25 pm
39	Cincinnati, O., Daily Except Sunday	5:40 pm
30	Lexington, Ky., Daily	6:03 pm
8	Louisville & Frankfort, Daily Except Sunday	6:03 pm
32	Jacksonville, Fla., Daily	6:05 pm
14	Lexington, Ky., Daily	10:45 pm
31	Cincinnati, O., Daily	10:50 pm

Trains Depart

No.	TO	
34	Cincinnati, O., Daily	5:28 am
4	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	5:35 am
29	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	7:47 am
40	Cincinnati, O., Daily Except Sunday	8:20 am
10	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	8:20 am
137	Lexington, Ky., Daily	9:57 am
37	Knoxville, Tenn., Daily	9:55 am
33	Jacksonville, Fla., Daily	10:24 am
133	Lexington, Ky., Daily	10:27 am
25	Maysville, K., Daily	12:05 pm
26	Cynthiana, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	12:04 pm
8	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	3:34 pm
39	Cincinnati, O., Daily	3:40 pm
9	Rowland, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	5:52 pm
39	Lexington, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	5:57 pm
32	Cincinnati, O., Daily	6:10 pm
8	Maysville, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	6:15 pm
13	Lexington, Ky., Daily	6:15 pm
30	Cynthiana, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	6:25 pm
31	Lexington, K., Daily	10:55 pm
13	Atlanta, Ga., Daily	10:57 pm

F. & C. TIME-TABLE

IN EFFECT OCTOBER, 3, 1911.

Trains Arrive

No.	FROM	
2	Frankfort, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	8:13 am
4	Frankfort, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	3:40 pm
8	Louisville & Frankfort, Daily Except Sunday	5:50 pm
162	Louisville & Frankfort, Sunday Only	10:00 pm

Trains Depart

No.	TO	
161	Frankfort & Louisville, Sunday Only	7:10 am
2	Frankfort & Louisville, Daily Except Sunday	7:43 am
1	Frankfort, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	9:53 am
3	Frankfort, Ky., Daily Except Sunday	5:52 pm